



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## ENGLISH COMPOSITION IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

ALL teachers who are interested in the subject of English composition are under obligation to Mr. George Bainton, who, when called upon to address a company of young men upon the art of composition and of effective public speech, happily bethought himself to ask a number of the leading writers of the day how they learned to write.

Among something like 150 replies to his inquiry, came answers from the historians, Lecky and Bryce; the teachers, Blackie, Boyesen, and Minto; the poets, Holmes, Lowell, Andrew Lang; the peerless editor, George William Curtis; and the world-renowned divine, Phillips Brooks.

The inspiring thing about the compilation of these answers is, that instead of a conflict of views leaving the subject in a cloud of mist and uncertainty, there is such a consensus of opinion that the gist of the thought, running through 350 pages of a very interesting book, might almost be condensed into a single page. The unanimity of agreement is so refreshing, indeed, that a few quotations, taken almost at random, will be excusable, I am sure.

"To write well is to think well," says Ernest Renan; "there is no art of style distinct from the culture of the mind. . . . Thus good training of the mind is 'the only school of style. Wanting that you have merely rhetoric and bad taste.'" F. W. Newman, brother of the famous cardinal, quite in accord with Renan's thought, uses practically the same language. "Good composition," he says, "depends on the total culture of the mind, and cannot be taught as a separate art." Then calling attention to a few elementary principles, he adds: "No one will write well who has to make a study of such matters when he sits down to write. All must previously have become an ingrained habit, *perhaps without his being aware of it.*"<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The italics are my own.

John Stuart Blackie contributes his testimony: "I never made any special study of style, and whatever virtue I may have in this way grew up as my mind grew, *unconsciously*." George William Curtis adds this remarkable statement: "Rhetoric or composition I have never studied. Whatever my style of writing may be it is the result of natural selection, and not of special design." Mr. Curtis then names a long list of authors who interested him deeply in his youth, furnishing models; and says that in addition to this reading, his long connection with the press, the necessity of making his thought intelligible and clear in short space, was probably the best training he could have had. And finally James Russell Lowell adds a word in similar strain: "I am inclined to think," he writes, "that a man's style is born with him;" and then, apart from this innate literary sense, he attributes whatever excellence he may have acquired in writing to the constant practice afforded by twenty years of lecturing in Harvard University.

Indeed, a noteworthy fact is, that all these men speak not of rules and principles, but of lists of books, favorite authors, who interested them, stimulated them, set them at work with high hope and earnest endeavor, pen in hand. "Cultivate the mind," they say, "have commerce with the best in literature, not for the sake of imitation, but to give tone to style; practice constantly, write from your personal thought and feeling, without affectation, simply, directly," "striving," as Howells puts it, "to get the grit of compact, clear truth, if possible, informal and direct."

Such are the answers of leading writers in reply to the question, "how did you learn to write?"

And their answers have intimate connection with the English composition of our high schools. More and more, we believe, teachers will come to an agreement upon a few plain pedagogical principles. Young people do not learn to write well by trying to apply the rules of any text-book to their writing, but *unconsciously* rather. Good writing, like good speech, must become a matter of habit, a sort of second nature; it is to be acquired only by having good models in reading; by long con-

tinued practice upon subjects that interest the writer; and finally by the kindly, encouraging, and authoritative criticism of an efficient corps of teachers.

We were amused recently in looking over the preface to one of the many publications upon how to teach literature, to read that the author, by his newly-discovered method, had radically altered the style of his students in a few weeks. Those who wrote in a lumbering, awkward fashion, began in a short time, he testifies, to express themselves in strong, clear phrases. Our pedagogue has probably not borne false witness, but he has certainly deceived himself. This radical alteration of the style of a student in a few weeks, this *speedy* transformation of lumbering, awkward expression into strength and clearness by some original method, or by any method whatsoever—this is pure pedagogical fallacy. "Would you learn to speak effectively," says Daniel Webster; "Converse, *converse*, CONVERSE, with living men, face to face, and mind to mind." Would our young people learn to express themselves effectively upon the written page, let them write, and write, and write, persistently, month by month, throughout their high-school course. There is no notion we need to get rid of more than the false notion that good English writing is to be acquired in the rhetoric class in a single term or semester. Perhaps we should gain something by declaring that English composition is best taught *by not teaching it at all*, that is by not having any distinctive course to which pupils are sent to *learn* composition, and which they are expected to complete as they complete algebra or physics.

The necessity of unwearyed practice, month by month throughout the high-school course, suggests to no one's mind, we trust, a tedious, routine task-work. Indeed, we believe that the first thing to be done is to make composition a pleasant exercise, to take out of it completely the deep and widespread feeling that it is a laborious grind. Can it not be made delightful? Can it not become one of the enjoyments of school life? If not, there is small hope of the improvement in writing which the public schools, the country over, are earnestly looking for.

Mr. Whipple tells a good story of his boyhood in the public schools of New England. Remarking upon the general dread of composition, upon its falseness of tone, upon the fact that the boys wrote not what they thought, but what it was thought they ought to think, he comments upon the character of the themes chosen for their juvenile efforts. Moral virtues and vices were the subjects their young minds grappled with, and they usually came to agree with the conclusions announced by the greatest moralists of the world, Socrates, Plato, Cicero, Seneca, etc. They used to begin every composition with the proposition that such and such a virtue "is one of the greatest blessings we enjoy," and this triumph of accurate statement, he remarks, was not discovered by the teacher to be purely mechanical until one juvenile thinker, having avarice to deal with, declared it to be "one of the greatest evils that we enjoy." Young Whipple, himself, timidly asked his teacher one day if he might select his own subject, and when allowed to do so filled several pages in the time ordinarily devoted to a quarter of a page, with an account of his being in a ship taken by a pirate, the heroic defiance he launched at the pirate captain, and the sagacity he showed in escaping the general order to "walk the plank." The composition, "though trashy enough," he says, "was so much better than any of the moral essays of the other pupils, that the teacher commanded me to read it before the whole school as an evidence of the rapid strides I had made in the art of composition."

And the story is worth telling. This tone of falseness is too frequently a quality of the compositions of our youth today. If ever any spontaneity, freshness, life, power, are to find their way into the written pages of our high-school boys and girls, it will be when they write upon subjects in which they take a natural and lively interest, subjects suggested by their environment, their experiences, their investigations, their imagination, their reading,—subjects, finally, upon which they have grown more or less eager to express their thoughts. The primary requisite to effective expression of a thought is to have a thought that you want very much to express. In proportion to one's interest

in it and his desire to express it, will be his disappointment at not getting it clearly before the minds of others.

It is the business, therefore, of the entire corps of high-school teachers, not to leave it to the teacher of English or to some text-book on rhetoric to suggest themes upon which the young people write, but to study sympathetically all phases of their fresh and enthusiastic young lives, and then to connect their writing with their interests and experiences. They are grouped about your rooms from day to day, talking with delightful freedom and raciness upon a great variety of themes, their faces lighting up with the vivacity and enthusiasm of youth. Must all this bright exuberance of hope and fancy and aspiration vanish like a dream when the pen is taken in hand? Or may something of its delightful quality be transcribed from time to time in a few neatly written paragraphs?

The best oration we have had in recent years at the State Normal College was written upon the old and threadbare theme of the annexation of Canada. A vigorous and athletic young fellow with little talent for writing, with a keen mind and an excellent record in science and mathematics was appointed to write a commencement speech. He came to me for a subject. "Subject," I said, "how do I know what you can write about? You have never been in my classes, I do not know you. What are you interested in? How have you touched human life thus far? Where were you brought up? Sit down and tell me about yourself. You have a rare opportunity, a thousand of the best people in the state will make up your audience; haven't you something that you should very much like to say to them?" And then he told me that his boyhood and early manhood had been spent in Canada, that at twenty-five years of age he was not yet a naturalized American citizen, that loving Canada still, he had pushed over into our civilization to take advantage of the larger opportunities the country everywhere afforded. "Very well," I suggested, "it is an old question, but have you anything to say to a thousand American citizens upon the contrast between their opportunities and those of your youth, or the possible advantages to both countries of uniting their

interests?" The young man's face lighted up instantly. He had found a subject, he was anxious to express his thoughts upon it, and in two weeks' time he brought me a speech that with a little pruning and rearrangement, might, in the opinion of our State Board of Education and faculties, have been creditably delivered upon the floors of Congress.

I shall go on to speak of the necessity that the entire corps of high-school teachers interest themselves in getting good English writing; the teacher of science for instance, insisting upon clear reports; the teacher of mathematics upon exact statements; the teacher of history, upon good narrative and description.

The criticism should in no case be too technical, but all teachers in a high school should be competent to have oversight over composition work so far as regards the fundamental principles of good writing, unity, coherence, proportion, and emphasis.

Lastly, I shall speak of the influence of good reading upon expression of thought, if style be too ambitious a word, and then wish to give a very brief account of my experiment in our training school.

I observe that the best modern text-books on English composition lay particular stress in their prefaces upon this very matter of choosing subjects and of cultivating a cheerful readiness in all English writing. I have simply emphasized what many good high schools are already doing, I suppose. And yet how inadequate, how entirely unsatisfactory are the results thus far. If any one has read in the *Educational Review* for this month (December 1897), Professor Hill's report upon the English writing at the recent entrance examination at Harvard University, he has simply had his attention again drawn to the severe and just criticism of the results we secure in English composition in our modern high school. And we are very positive that the remedy will never be found in any so-called *course* in elementary rhetoric or composition. The conning over for any length of time of words, words, words, illustrated by short and lifeless sentences; of principles formally stated and exem-

plified in short paragraphs that the student has no interest in,—it is this that takes the very heart and life out of any genuine interest and pleasure in composition.

As I write I take down from my shelves one of a dozen rhetorics, and, opening at random to a single page, read: "I don't care for proctors now; I'm an alumnum. I don't care for proctor's now, I'm an alumnus. On examination, I found a bacteria. On examination, I found a bacterium. The study of English should be a part of every college curricula. The study of English should be a part of every college curriculum." And when the young student has gotten through the half page he is prepared, I suppose, to distinguish between, not an alumnus and an alumna, but between an alumnus and some imaginary *alumnum*, between bacteria and bacterium, curricula and curriculum, dicta and dictum; and if, with his ears humming with the *ä* and *um*, he has not been stimulated to high endeavor in all spelling and word study for the future, then is he a fit subject for the commiseration of all his friends, for one hundred and fifty odd pages of similar inspiring exercises are to form his daily diet. Do we dream, fellow-teachers, that we are to quicken in eager young minds a genuine love of the right word in the right place, and a delicate sensitiveness to accuracy of diction by any such barren, routine exercises upon long lists of isolated sentences? If so, we had better revive, as an accompaniment to our rhetoric study, *Murray's English Grammar* with its one hundred pages of rules to be committed to memory, followed by its one hundred pages of exercises in false syntax to be corrected.

We believe in the mastery of a few plain principles of composition, but we believe that any text-book of rhetoric should be largely a mere handbook of reference, and that the principles should be worked out inductively through the study of entire masterpieces in literature. And apart from the higher qualities of style; euphony, rhythm, cadence, harmony,—qualities to be acquired only through the sensitive ear cultivated by wide reading;—apart from these higher qualities, the elementary principles that lie within the profitable study of the high-school students are both few and plain. Without being too tech-



nical, let us say that every piece of English should be characterized by clearness, unity, and effectiveness; in sentence structure, paragraph structure, and in the structure of the composition as a whole.

And now our greatest need is, not for more daily theme-writing, cultivating a ready faculty with the pen in dashing off a few sentences or paragraphs, but that which the entire corps of high-school teachers should interest themselves in, the spelling, punctuation, and working out of these elementary principles in all the papers that come under their examination. We do not need a laboratory of English composition any more than we need a laboratory of good manners. The whole tone and atmosphere of the high school should be against slovenly and incorrect English, both in speech and in writing. Let the teacher in science, whose daily reading is bringing under his eye the best types of lucid English, encourage his pupils constantly to secure in their reports something of the lucidity with which they are all familiar upon the written page. Let the teacher of mathematics, in both oral and written work, insist upon a student's saying correctly and accurately just what he wishes to say. Let the teacher of history demand clear, logical statements, good narrative and description in the working out of historical topics throughout the course. Let the teacher of foreign languages not be satisfied with the sense merely in translation, let him secure rather the putting of the thought of the foreign tongue into smooth and idiomatic English. And if the teachers of science, mathematics, history, and foreign languages are not capable of doing this sort of work, they are decidedly out of place in the modern high school.

Again and again in the State Normal College we have insisted that the English which the student finds at his command when upon his feet, or with pen in hand, is the product of the training of the entire institution; and we count ourselves fortunate in having a president and faculty entirely in sympathy with this idea. If ever the habits of high-school students are to become fixed in the use of good English, it will be when this general assistance on the part of every teacher in the high school is

cheerfully and effectively rendered. To write good English for the English teacher because he is especially critical, and bad English for three or four other teachers because they will accept any sort of English,—this is like trying to reform the religious life by donning the Sunday suit and bowing the head in the pew on Sunday morning, and putting on the old clothes and a low work-a-day level of life on Monday morning.

We have left for brief, final statement, the relation between good models in reading and the attainments of excellence in writing. And just here it is that the teacher of English has his highest and most fruitful work to do. He, more fully and effectively than any other teacher, can pause over perfect models, and point out concrete illustrations not only of unity and effectiveness, but of all those emotional qualities which give to any particular style its peculiar tone and character. Brooding with his students, mind to mind, over what is sweet and beautiful and sublime in literature, there shall come to them all such a love of the mother tongue, such a gratitude for their inheritance, such an indescribable sense of the power and the beauty of the language into which they are born, that the spirit of this literary study, reacting upon their own minds, stimulating intellect and heart with high ideals, shall modify, improve, and perfect their own style of expression more effectively, perhaps, than all other sources combined. Let us repeat the thought with which we began. The men and women who are the effective writers of the day attribute their attainment very largely to their models in reading.

In Professor Hill's account of the Harvard examination, above referred to, the following brief statement is made of Evangeline's pathetic recognition of Gabriel :

"Evangeline found Gabriel in a poorhouse in Philadelphia.

"She discovered him at once from the others, although he had been changed by the fever.

"He was about gone, but she held his head on her bosom until he died, and then said, 'I thank God for His mercy.'"

The most serious trouble with this bit of English is that no adequate literary feeling for the poem itself has reacted upon the

student's mind to shape and color his expression of thought. He is evidently more possessed with the fact that he is taking an examination than he is with the spirit of the poem. Perhaps, indeed, he studied *Evangeline* mainly in reference to the Harvard examination. If ever the beauty and pathos of her lifelong devotion had touched his heart; if ever the exquisite story had charmed him as it charmed Nathaniel Hawthorne, who wished to have parts of it read to him over and over again in his last days,—if, I say, any adequate appreciation of this rare gem in our literature had ever possessed his mind, he could no more have described the sad, closing scene in such crude, unfeeling English, than he could have wilfully offended the beautiful girl herself, if, in all her youth and beauty, she had stood before him. John Burroughs has expressed a single thought concerning his own writing, quite pertinent to this particular case: "I must feel the thing first, and then I can say it; I must love the subject upon which I write, it must adhere to me, and for the time being become a part of me."

Perhaps this paper from a normal college teacher may appropriately close with an account of an experiment carried on in my own family. My thought was that a young child might be led to take pleasure in writing, and that in addition to mere correctness of form his style might be improved in no small degree by good reading, much practice in writing, and kindly, authoritative criticism. The boy was in the fourth grade, just entering upon his ninth year when the experiment began. He was a good average scholar in all subjects, I was told, not especially interested in science or mathematics, a poor speller, very careless in his form of writing, but fond of reading, and in language and composition one of the best in his grade. For two years I kept in close touch with his teachers, was acquainted with his reading and writing in school, and of course had charge of his reading and writing out of school. Once in every two or three weeks he was encouraged to choose his own subject and to bring me a short composition; not a single paragraph, but a complete bit of narrative, or description, or reproduction. My criticisms were entirely general: "In this sentence, don't you

see, there is a little break in the thought, let us put in a comma there. This sentence is longer, you have already used the comma, here is a larger break in the thought, we will use the semicolon here. That paragraph is very good, but read both paragraphs over to me. Do you see? They don't connect very well. You have done very well, indeed, but you must try to make your composition *hold together* from beginning to end. The next book you read just notice how easily the writer passes from one paragraph to another, and how they all hold together."

Among many books read at home, read with pleasure and not as a task, I note the following: Hawthorne, *Short Stories*; *Tanglewood Tales*; *Wonder Book*; Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*; Schwatka's *Children of the Cold*; Selection, from *Æsop's Fables*; Hans Andersen's *Fairy Tales*; Hale's *Arabian Nights*; Jane Andrew's *Ten Boys*, etc.; Stories from *Waverley*; Burrough's *Bird and Bees*; Selections from Irving's *Sketch Book*; Coffin's *Old Times in the Colonies*; *Boys of '76*; *Building the Nation*; *Drumbeat of the Nation*; *Marching to Victory*; *Freedom Triumphant*, and *Following the Flag*. These books of Coffin's were read and re-read with great interest, as were the Leather Stocking Series of Cooper, *Deerslayer*; *Pathfinder*; *The Prairie*, and *The Last of the Mohicans*. Indeed, the child was not pressed to read any book that did not interest him. More than one book was drawn from the library and returned unread. He did not get interested in it.

The summer before the reading of Cooper he had an opportunity to visit Niagara Falls, to wander up and down the river with his parents for several days. His young imagination was overwhelmed with the grandeur of the scenery, and he read everything he could find concerning its formation and history. In the following winter, while still in the sixth grade, three years' removal from the high school, he became deeply interested in Cooper's novel. In the midst of his reading it occurred to him to write a description of Niagara Falls. The time for writing was in every respect favorable. It was not an examination; it was not writing for the sake of writing; the child was in the midst of a course of reading that gave him good models of

description, stimulated his imagination, and awakened the mood for writing. The scene to be described was one that he cherished the memory of with delight, and his writing was to be handed in to one whom he wished to please. The composition was brought to me completed before I knew that the subject had been chosen, and it is given here simply as an interesting report upon a pedagogical experiment. Unfortunately I have lost the original draft. The rewritten copy, as here given, contains two or three slight changes in connection which the boy himself made at my suggestion, a half dozen misspelled words have been corrected, perhaps three changes made in diction, and as I recall it now, none whatever in sentence structure.

#### NIAGARA FALLS<sup>1</sup>

The most magnificent of all nature's wonders is the fall of Niagara. There is something grand about its foaming, dashing torrent, that neither poet nor author can describe. Its beautiful green water leaps over the great precipice, and, as it touches the rocks at its base turns into snow-white drapery. Then rising slowly, bathing the tempestuous waters with its silvery white, and reflecting the sparkling beams of the sun, is the beautiful mist.

The best view of the falls can be obtained from Canada because from there you can look them straight in the face. At the left a white sheet of foam falls one hundred and sixty-four feet in its descent. It is called Little Horseshoe or American Falls. Then turning to the right one gazes straight into the face of the great Horseshoe. The water here does not fall as far as that of the American, but a far larger body leaps over the great precipice.

On the American side you can walk all around them on the paths of a rustic park; sometimes crawling over large boulders, which are covered by small spears of grass and dark green moss. Suddenly an opening looms up in the distance, and you gaze out upon the rapids, whose turbulent waters seem never to stop except when they dash into foam on the crest of some massive rock.

Passing farther up the river we come to a placid sheet of water very unlike the one we left. O, how many, many, persons have ventured on this peaceful spot! But most never to return. "Let us go a little farther toward the rapids," say they. Yes a little nearer, a little nearer. Their boat goes a little swifter, a little swifter. Ah, but it is too late for they are already in the rapids; their efforts in vain. They fall back, hope gone, their bark going faster and faster, until amid their wails and cries it leaps over the falls.

<sup>1</sup> Written in sixth grade of Michigan State Normal School by a child ten years of age.

Indeed, many persons have become fascinated with the beauty and majesty of this wonderful cataract. One of these was Francis Abbot, who was said to be talented, by persons who conversed with him. He visited all the principal places in this vicinity and wanted to build him a house on Goat Island. He was finally permitted to do so. Occasionally he bathed in the quieter currents, but could not restrain himself from doing what the swifter ones were always whispering in his ears. One day he was not anywhere to be seen, not even in his dwelling place. When search was made his body was found floating in the Niagara river. It is supposed that he ventured too far, was caught by the swift current and carried over the falls. He is buried near the thundering cataract where he can hear the music of the wayward billows as they roll onward toward the sea.

Every year the Indians (who used to live in this vicinity) used to offer a human sacrifice to the spirit of the falls. It consisted of a white canoe laden with fruits and flowers, and paddled by the fairest girl in the tribe. At last, the lot fell on the chief's daughter. He was aged, his wife had been killed by a hostile tribe, and the girl was his only comfort. Without shedding a tear he watched the preparations for the coming feast.

At last the appointed day arrived. The night was made hideous with the fiendish yells of savages. At last the white canoe was launched, the girl steering toward the center of the fall. Amid the uproar and confusion another white canoe shot from the bank of the river impelled by the powerful arms of the chief. He overtook his daughter, and together they plunged over the thundering cataract into the other world.

Niagara has also its historical vicinity. Not far from it was fought the battle of Lunday's Lane, and also the battle of Queenstown Heights, where Sir Isaac Brock, the British general, fell. On the battleground a fine monument has been erected in his honor. Also down the river is a place called Devil's Hole, where a party of British soldiers were driven over the cliff by some Indians.

My composition is finished, but Niagara is still untold. You cannot admire its beauty and majesty until you have seen it for yourself. It must always be as Tugby says, "Niagara is still and always shall be unpainted and unsung."

There are evidences here of a boy's hand, to be sure, but he had something to say and enjoyed saying it. There are illustrations, also, of sentences well put together, of periodic structure made effective, of elaboration and condensation, of good narrative and good description,—and this on the part of a child who never conned over any exercises in false syntax, was never drilled upon long lists of sentences to be improved by rearrangement, and never heard any formal statement of even

the elementary principles of rhetoric. We believe the experiment is pedagogically worth reporting, and that it indicates approximately what may be done with an entire grade below the high school. It seems to us to verify our theories and to hint at a method of work, which followed out through the high-school course, would do much to improve the English writing of our American youth.

F. A. BARBOUR

MICHIGAN STATE NORMAL COLLEGE